

Submission to the Vic. Gov. on Eco System Decline

My name is Bronwyn Spark: president of Friends of Pt. Addis and the Ironbark Basin. (phone [REDACTED] Email [REDACTED]) On behalf of our very knowledgeable and environmentally involved members I am lodging this public submission. This National Park involves a large marine area (4,600ha), adjoining coast strip, ironbark forest and heath land and includes scenic and variable terrain along the increasing popular Surf Coast Walk. With rapid population growth between Geelong and Torquay and the surge in use during Covid this area is in danger of being loved to death. (Record numbers in the thousands were recorded by Parks at the family beach during Summer). Being familiar also with many environments across Victoria we are alarmed at the decline of eco systems and the number of threats that are diminishing bio-diversity.

Our group has worked effectively with Parks over the last 18 years on marine and coastal enhancement :Sea Search, Reef Watch, beach cleans, revegetation, removal of invasive species, protection of native species, education programs, rock pool rambles. In particular, over the last 5 years, hooded plover protection has involved many volunteer hours of monitoring, wardening and public information activities. Unfortunately due to the following threats (higher tides and surges, their eggs being in the path of the Surf Coast Walk at high tide and predators) only 2 eggs have ever hatched. Both of these chicks met their end just before they fledged, when they were chased and chomped by dogs illegally "off lead". Pt. Addis NP is a dogs on lead at all times area and although Parks Vic. staff increased surveillance during hooded plover breeding season it is impossible with limited staff to cover so many demands on their time, particularly in Summer. (campers, trail bikers, bush fires etc).I have also witnessed dogs "off lead" harassing a seal that needed rest on the beach. With increasing numbers of people and dogs visiting our NP the eco systems cannot be protected without more staff. The dogs "on lead" rule that many people assume means let your dogs run free needs to be revoked. Dog poo litter and poo bags being washed into the sea is not protection of our environment.

However since Pt. Addis was given protection as a marine NP in 2002 the eco system is healthier:

- the beaches are cleaner (almost no fisher folk garbage)
- marine species are thriving (Parks surveys and reports)
- sea weeds are growing and hopefully sequestering more carbon.

However as all our ocean temperatures rise and become more acidic there is a continuing decline in the bio diversity of marine species. So we need this government to take immediate action to rein in green house gases; rapidly transition to clean energy and phase out coal and gas plants. We need more protection of wetlands, seagrass meadows and mangrove areas that provide species nurseries and places for carbon sequestering. No new gas project for Western Port Bay.

In contrast to our marine section of the Park, in the Ironbark Basin and surrounding land we have seen significant declines in vegetation and animal bio diversity. In particular, PHYTOPHTHORA DIEBACK (aka cinnamon fungus) has contributed to the death of many grass trees and associated species, meaning less homes for the insects, reptiles and birds that found homes there. In efforts to halt the spread of PHYTOPHTHORA DIEBACK, our group has done major work with grants for research, public education (workshops and brochures), signage and boot & bike wash stations. These measures were all under taken, after a poorly implemented response to Black Saturday fires, meant contractors were engaged to bull doze a 40 m Asset Protection Zone on the southern boundary of properties along the rim of the Ironbark Basin. They were ignorant of protocols to be followed and

spread the contaminated soil where water run off could take it further. (phytophthora cinnamomi officially known as phytophthora dieback) is a water borne mould that thrives in damp soil and is typically spread on foot wear, bike and car tyres.) Along this zone there is now limited plant life(no orchids), few bird varieties and snakes, lizards and echidnas are rarely seen. Sightings of these species has markedly declined over the last 10 of the 20 years I lived on 5 acres adjoining the Basin. We now see foxes, rabbits deer, and feral cats. One of our members on Pt. Addis road has counted 30 to 50 deer on his 90 acre property and employed shooters to take out the lead buck. Deer cause damage and loss to threatened eco systems yet are protected as a game species; do they need to be declared feral?

Another concern along this Asset Protection Zone is the introduction and spread of the South African orchid *Disa bracteata*. The heavy slashing machinery appears to encourage its spread.

Increasing human use is also an important factor to consider in keeping eco systems intact and healthy. The rapid rise in housing and population from Geelong to Torquay and the explosive discovery of Pt. Addis MNP means it's in danger of being loved to it's detriment. Over Summer Parks counters at just the family beach recorded daily numbers in the 1000's, along with car parking problems and traffic jams. Covid. also induced this over use early in the shutdown when Pt. Addis hit the headlines for over crowding. Cars broke vegetation as they squeezed into minimal spots both along the road and in the car park opposite Addiscot Beach access. Unfortunately minimal repair occurs to vegetation with the dry, harsh conditions. Covid has also meant an exponential increase in use of tracks in the Ironbark Forest and along the Surf Coast Walk. The impact of mountain bike riding along many of the pedestrian tracks is also having a gradual negative effect on track surfaces and nearby vegetation, particularly where there are steep grades. Again these issues highlight the need for more protection in our Parks and increased personnel to enforce rules and maintain tracks.

Our volunteer group has been extremely effective in working directly with and under the guidance of Parks officers so we are concerned that our productive working relationship may be destroyed when the new Great Ocean Road Authority (GORA) takes control of all land on the sea side. When our members attended the so called community consultations we could get no answers as to how this body would operate and whether the expertise, local knowledge, funding and current protections of NP would effectively continue. The Authority was set up, at great expense to supposedly get rid of duplication of efforts and lack of co ordination by different governing bodies; these dollars could have been used for this. We just hope the cure isn't worse than the problems it was meant to fix, or we will have another threat to maintaining eco systems.

Another concern of our group was that the legislative framework does not consider cumulative impacts on populations of threatened and endangered species. Protection issues are considered individually, allowing "the death by a 1000 cuts" principle to apply, that completely undermines the aims of protective legislation. This is occurring across all habitats and populations. It is vital legislation ensures broad scale protection.

In summary we urge stronger legislation to protect eco systems; more national parks and adequate funding so they can most effectively carry out their primary function. As we have found through our group's activities ,education and engagement of the public is also vital to understanding how our actions impact on these systems and how every person can make a difference. Vic. has many resourceful, flexible and innovative people and businesses that post Covid, can assist us to rebuild, fully mindful of our greatest challenge; maintaining complete eco systems that also support clean air, clean water, and sustainable food production.